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PROUD LADY OF THE THIRD FLEET

by

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There is a hospital ship the Third Fleet calls "The Proud First Lady". She earned her name with the fighting ships of the Navy in the last two months before surrender. . . .

With muddy, bloody Okinawa almost secured the Fleet began to prowl the coastal waters of Japan. July and August days were filled with raids designed to break the enemy. Nagoya, Yokosuka, the Kure Naval Base . . . Yokohama and Tokyo . . . Halsey's intrepid men and ships struck fiercely. And though there was relatively little opposition yet there were wounded.

Admiral Halsey said, "Send me the RESCUE. . ." She wasn't one of the big new air-conditioned ships the whole Pacific was still waiting for expectantly. She was just another of the converted ships. But perhaps he knew the ship had speed, she had experience. As a submarine tender and transport she had been called the "Grayhound". But as a hospital ship off the beach at Okinawa her own crew dubbed her "The Mighty R".

Now with the fleet the RESCUE stalked the offshore squalls and heavy seas as defiantly as the most menacing battlewagon. Proud lady . . . she was one among hundreds of ships massed horizon-wide in task force formations. Sometimes she sailed by the flagship far in the lead. Francing white hull, colored with holiday red and green, she gleamed amid battle gray. Then a winking signal light or a coded signal flag, and the RESCUE sailed off. A small and graceful ship, she was easy to handle and quick to respond. She

sailed through positions, cut across the course of carriers and battleships, and sidled up to the ship that signalled "Casualty". Sometimes she kept a steady course in strategic position for ships to join her. Cruiser off the port beam, destroyer off the starboard . . ."rig your lines men, we'll take your patients."

She was a lucky ship! This was new. It was exciting duty for a hospital ship! It meant a non-combatant auxiliary ship sailed with "the big boys" with her assured bounty of comfort and healing and her modern hospital facilities ever-ready.

Each patient sent over from combat brought something of her own ship with him in his spirit and outlook, in his fiery loyalty to defend her position as "the best ship of the Fleet." And during hostilities when the RESCUE lay off at a rendezvous point, they were tense and impatient for news of their ship. The BENNINGTON, RANDOLPH, and SHANGRI-LA . . . the SOUTH DAKOTA, MISSOURI, MASSACHUSETTS, and INDIANA . . . the SAN JUAN and FLINT . . . the WALKER, the BLACK, the FRANK KNOX . . . they were all represented. The RESCUE was alive with story!

Sometimes long before dawn an anxious patient would waken. He'd call to the night corpsman, "Please go up on deck and see if you can spot 'em returning . . . and watch for the 629 will ya?"

To the Nurses coming on duty . . . "We do meet the Fleet today, don't we? Well say, if the SHANGRI comes 'longside will you call over for mail?"

Or, "Did the BLACK come back, did ya see 'er? Take me out on deck then. I want them guys to see me with Nurses - real Nurses."

On this duty Nurses were really appreciated. We had so much proof of it . .

The shrill whistle of the bosun's pipe would call with the message,

"Second Division lay aft to the fantail and prepare to take patients."

Mastropool always yipped, "Here comes another one . . . lucky guy! This is good duty . . . good duty!" He had already asked for forgiveness for staring. He said he wanted to eat us up with his eyes.

Taking patients went on day after day, but to take patients at sea never ceased to be exciting. The bosun might just as well call "All hands lay topside to welcome a ship" for that is exactly what every off-duty person would do. We would gather on all open deck space to call across and wave. . .

"Anyone there from Brooklyn?"

"How many patients you sending?"

"When's the next raid . . . your man Mathews wants to know?"

"Say, when are you going to win us this war?"

"How about Texans, how many Texans you got?"

But invariably voices from the other ships would call out, "Bring 'em up . . . put 'em forward where we can see. Where are the Nurses? Where are the WOMEN?"

I asked Pavo about this eagerness. He had been injured with molten metal in the explosion of a five inch gun. He was convalescent now. He was usually topside to watch activities. He would say, "Just wish the old FLINT would come alongside. The fellows would sure envy me standing with Nurses. Why, I'll have a hundred questions to answer when I get back aboard!"

"But what do you really think about a hospital ship with your Fleet... what does it mean to you men?" I asked.

Bruce, swinging by on his crutches, overheard. "We think you're darn good sports on the RANDOLPH."

But Pavo laughed. I think he was embarrassed. "You heard 'em. It means women...girls...Nurses. Those fellows are lined up to look at something they've been missing for months!"

I asked other patients. None of them really thought of the RESCUE as the ship that took casualties...until they were wounded. "Nope, nobody looks over at this green, red, and white 'christmas tree' and exactly thinks about someday being brought aboard wounded, "I was assured. "Leastways they don't talk about it. You just go on thinking, It can't happen to me."

Some of them told how "Make preparations to join Hospital Ship" meant a mad rush for scivvie or dungaree shirt and cap - a courtesy intended for ladies! Others told how the Skipper called out, "Hospital Ship coming up-comb your hair lads - there'll be women."

To one battle-torn destroyer the RESCUE sent over some ice cream and the last crates of cherished Oranges. Came back the signal, "Oranges and ice cream much appreciated, but thanks for the chance to look at your Nurses." Many of the ships called out as they sailed away, "Good luck RESCUE. And goodbye girls." Some signalled, "How about dinner if and when we get back to port?"

Strangely enough, sending patients to a hospital ship apparently meant a quick chance at fun for all hands. But largely it was a cheering sendoff, complete with a full brass band sometimes, for the combat wounded. They captured much of this same gay good spirit. It even endured through the pain of their most cruel injuries...

Said Tony, swathed in head bandages, "I have one good eye left. Couldn't you line up the Nurses and walk 'em through slowly? Me 'n the

corpsman here could hold a beauty contest. Good duty for this eye, don'tcha think?"

There was Jamie with both legs amputated below the knee. He was struck down by a wild night-flying plane on the flight deck of his carrier. The great wheels ground over to pulverize the bones. Beside him lay Ashlock in a huge hip spica. Because of his complicated femoral and tibial fractures the cast was put on in eversion. Although he was safe he looked as though he was constantly slipping out of his bunk. These two would laugh as they visualized the day he would crack up on the deck in the next heavy sea.

Lee roused from unconsciousness and looked at the Wangenstein set-up about him. A smile lurked on his pale lips as he said, "Who's the mechanic or is Rube Goldberg aboard?"

There was every type of injury typical of fighting ships and planes on the effensive...burns and fractures, concussion, and all the multiplicity of wounds sustained when molten shrapnel rips into the body. These were men shot down in missions over Tokyo, men whose planes were torn apart with flak and crashed into the sea. Or they were survivors left in the burning rubble of ships the Kamikazes hit. One such fanatic suicide plane sought out the destroyer BORIE.

Though a cruelly hit ship she limped away from the Fleet attack operations and sent out her call. "RESCUE...calling the RESCUE...we have casualties... the BORIE has casualties."

The hospital ship rushed away from her rendezvous point - toward Japan and the crippled ship. The night was wild with squalls of wind and rain. It was black, portentous, with no sign of the destroyer. The ship made ready

speedily, with stretchers, blankets, morphine and first-aid boxes on the fantail. The lines and pulleys were rigged to swing the stretchers across from ship to ship. The shock ward readied bunks, oxygen equipment, and made up flasks of plasma. Excitement soared! Yet those who looked into the darkness for the first glimpse of the ship looked with dread.

She came out of the murky night with the two forward gun mounts ripped and blackened, pointing askew. Flame and shrapnel had ravaged the bridge beyond recognition. The radar and foremast were twisted and broken. The forward smokestack bent in on itself. Explosive force had obliterated most of the superstructure and gunmounts, and scattered everywhere were parts of the fanatic Kamikaze plane.

There was such quietness, such deserted decks! Men helping to bring the stretcher patients out on the deck were bandaged too, and the few who stood by to watch or to handle the lines were gray and tattered. They looked infinitely tired. There was fatigue in the voice that called over... "Are you ready for thirty-four critical cases... do you have oxygen ready... two men require constant oxygen." Those two men had to make the trip across the black rushing water between ships without oxygen, dependent only on the speed of the hands pulling the lines. But in a matter of minutes they were again under therapy and with plasma dripping into their veins.

Back and forth the pulleys carried the stretchers, with blistered hands pulling the lines. It was a grim business continuing past midnight and weird in the light of the hospital ship. But there was enough light to show extensively burned men and pain-tortured eyes...the clinging sweat

and pallor of shock. For the rest of the night and the following days it was plasma and more plasma, blood transfusions, burn cintment and pressure dressings. There was surgery to align fractures, to amputate limbs lost beyond all hope. It meant intensive, devoted nursing care! Men too sick to talk would rouse from fitful sleep to ask, "Nurse, how is Lindsey, he was burned bad...Nurse, Have you seen Frengel. Did he lose both eyes?" No one dared tell them the number of their dead...the number lost over the side... we were concerned with the living.

Day after day the Fleet struck in at the coast with the RESCUE tagging along to take wounded...from a carrier listing and down at the bow, from a cruiser when an antiaircraft gun jammed and exploded...The Fleet was relentlessly pounding an already throttled enemy - intent on complete and utter defeat.

And then at last there was word of surrender! It was true! There were cheers, tears, hand-clasps. Somebody whispered, "Thank God." Another boy choked, "Too late for too many of us." Somebody laughed as he said, "Oh won't it be good to go home."

That afternoon the RESCUE turned and slipped away from the Fleet. Japanese waters would be peaceful waters now...The mission with the fighting ships was at an end and these wounded needed further care. But this hospital ship was still First Lady with the Fleet! Her orders read, "Debark your casualties at Guam base hospitals. Return with all possible speed." Tokyo lay ahead!